The Latest for December 21st 2009 - Special Edition
Fred Cady Response to November 20, 2009 IM letter

December 21, 2009

Mr. Kevin Bruski
Interoperability Montana
2717 Skyway Drive, Suite E
Helena, MT 59602

Dear Mr. Bruski,

Thank you for your letter of November 20, 2009, also published in Butch Weedon's "The Latest" e-newsletter. I continue to be concerned about the development of the digital state-wide trunked system and its impact on local public service communications around the state. The three points you make in your letter raise the following points and questions.

> **IM will not force any jurisdiction to join the system, use the system or pay into it. That includes fire departments and fire districts, many of which already operate on shoestring budgets and have no taxing authority.*

While jurisdictions may not be forced to join the state-wide digital trunked system, it seems clear that support for conventional systems has not been forthcoming. I would ask the following questions:

- What support has the IM project given to jurisdictions that have not joined the state-wide system?
- What percentage of DHS and other funds available to the state-wide system has been given to local jurisdictions to improve or enhance their local conventional systems?
- How much of the federal and state funds do you foresee in the future will be allocated to improving local, conventional systems?
- Have you committed to support the development of conventional systems any place in the state? If so, by what mechanism may other conventional system users apply for support?

> **We are not out to get a trunked radio into the hands of every fire fighter in Montana. In fact, I've said many times during our outreach tour that not every fire fighter needs a trunked radio. However, one or two mobile units in command vehicles might be useful for communication with other disciplines or agencies. While we can't recommend one radio over another, we are trying to provide more information about radios through our website so that fire departments and other public safety people can make more informed decisions about radio purchases.*

If we were to place one or two trunked radios in our command units, particularly if we are dispatched over a trunked system, we would find ourselves trending back to the days of the town siren alerting firefighters that an emergency is occurring. In those days, firefighters had to come to the station to find out what they were responding to. Today, operations coordination starts to take place immediately after the pager alerts us. This provides increased safety for responders and enhanced service levels for our community residents. To continue this operational need, particularly in the scenario where emergency response is dispatched over a trunked system and where only one or two commanders are in contact with dispatch, a parallel

conventional system must be maintained by local government. This is what has occurred in Lewis and Clark County. The bottom line is that trunked radio systems substantially increase the cost of critical public service communication while not providing responders with the tools needed.

Does the IM project anticipate providing support for the continued use of conventional systems so that local users and taxpayers do not have to fund parallel systems?

> **I've heard multiple times that fire fighters always are looking for "one more tool." For fire services, IM simply is another communications tool, one that is most likely to be used by commanders as they share information with others at their level.*

When searching for “one more tool” each of us must consider the cost/benefit of the proposed tool. The initial and on-going costs of digital trunked system, whether serving local or state-wide agencies, are simply too much for local governments to chew off and to sustain. The expanded coverage advantages of a digital trunked system can be achieved at much lower cost by using conventional technologies such as linked, simulcast, and vote-steered systems. The increased number of trunked “channels” or “talk groups”, particularly when simultaneous conversations are needed during an extended or large incident, is also easily met by the use of the conventional color channels. Indeed, this appears to be the current SOP for Lewis and Clark County fire incidents, and our experience in Gallatin County with three major incidents over the past two years with no communications failures has proven it to be true.

> *In the coming weeks, IM will develop an informational effort especially for the fire services community. Fire fighters have plenty of questions about radios, about trunking, about operating procedures and about the IM system itself; we plan to answer all of them and clearly state what IM can do for fire fighters, and what it cannot do.*

I hope you will explain that we now have a totally interoperable radio system in the shared channel system (color channels) with which we can communicate with other responders around the state, including law enforcement, highway patrol, EMS providers, and tow truck drivers. Please explain how a digital, trunked, state-wide system can provide increased interoperability for fire operations in comparison to the color channel system we now enjoy.
In your scenario where only one or two command vehicles have system-capable radios, please explain how the IM system concept can operate without the continuation and enhancement of local conventional systems.

It would certainly be useful also for your audiences to hear about the relative costs (initial and on-going) of the digital trucked state-wide system versus conventional systems.

Finally, I think you should be clear that there are compelling studies and evidence from around the nation that digital and digital trunked technologies should not be used in life-safety applications.

Sincerely,

Fred Cady
Chief (Ret)
Fort Ellis Fire Service Area